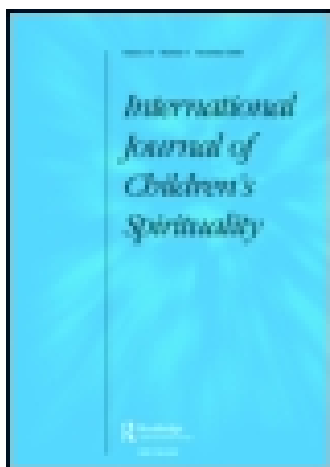


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## Pastoral power in nurturing the spiritual life of the child

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In this article, I will investigate the link between – what the French philosopher Michel Foucault calls – ‘pastoral power’ and the concept of ‘nurturing children’s spirituality.’ In the first step, I will explain the concept of pastoral power. In a second step, I will look to some literature about nurturing the spirituality of the child and the tips and tricks they give to nurturing the spirituality of the child. I will develop how power is present and how it can be abused easily. By nurturing the spirituality of their child, parents can control the life of the child. I will argue that it is important that everyone who works with children is aware of the hidden forms of power in nurturing the spirituality of the child in order to not misuse their power.

**Keywords:** pastoral power; Foucault; abuse of power; nurturing children’s spirituality

### Introduction

Children ask millions of questions. They ask for example ‘What’s this?’ ‘Why do you do that?’, but also ‘Why does this happen?’, or ‘What happens if ...?’ Parents, as primary caregivers, and all others who work with children – as for example pastoral caregivers – are those to whom these questions are addressed. Spontaneously, and sometimes also reluctantly or wearily, caregivers answer these questions because of the responsibility they experience in caring for children. By answering these questions and by caring for children, they (implicitly) nurture children’s spirituality. By caring for and nurturing the spirituality of the children, parents and other caregivers can have influence over the life of children. They have a certain (subtle) power of which they need to be aware in order not to abuse it. It is this subtle power that the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984) calls ‘pastoral power’ (*pouvoir pastoral*).

In this article, I will investigate the link between this ‘pastoral power’ and the concept of ‘nurturing children’s spirituality.’ Children’s spirituality is seen as the capacity children initially possess to search for meaning in their lives. Children’s spirituality is embedded in everyday life, has influence over the life of the child, and shapes the child’s way of being (Miller-McLemore 2003; Champagne 2005; Hay and Nye 2006; Allen 2008; Hyde 2008; Nye 2009). But it is also important that this spirituality, possessed by the child, be nurtured and stimulated.

In the first step, I will briefly explain the concept of pastoral power. In a second step, I will give consideration to some literature on nurturing the spirituality of the

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child and the tips and tricks experts give concerning the nurturing of a child's spirituality. I will further explore how power is present and how it can easily be abused.

### Pastoral power

Power can best be described as a phenomenon that is present everywhere. Everyone has a certain access to power. This means that everyone has a chance to exercise an influence. Power makes every relationships asymmetrical, but this does not mean that power is necessarily negative. However, we are not always aware of the present power. In some relationships, it is very clear that power is at hand. In such cases, power expresses itself mostly in its hierarchical form and through a negative use of 'power over.' When we are aware of the power that is present, power is usually defined as being negative. In other relationships, we have the feeling that there is no power present at all. Many relationships seem at first sight to be free of power, or we think that we act without any recourse to power. However, this is impossible. Where we consider or expect no power to be present, power is subtly at work. Power can take for example the form of loving care and service, of self-giving and self-sacrifice, of social support or well-intended guidance (Steinkamp 1999, 9–10). Even when it is said that something is done 'out of love,' or that something is done 'with pleasure,' or 'just for fun,' there is always a certain power present. For example, holding the door for someone is mostly seen as a friendly gesture, but in holding the door there is always power present, also if you do it 'with pleasure.' By holding the door, you appropriate a certain power and have a certain power over the person for whom you hold the door. By holding the door, you maybe want to try to make yourself indispensable or you are longing to get a 'thank you' as recognition. By holding the door, you can see the person in a certain way as someone who needs help and you push the person in a submissive position, the person is (implicitly) directed to the door. In such instances, people see primarily the good intentions and not the power that lies behind them. It is this subtle character of power that makes it at times difficult to detect power and power abuse.

Foucault (1997, 2004) has paid great attention to this subtle character of power and entitles it 'pastoral power' (*pouvoir pastoral*). Pastoral power is a form of power that fully penetrates and shapes the life of an individual in a subtle way. Foucault viewed it as a new form of power in modern society that can no longer be understood as a hierarchical form of power, that is characterised by a direct exercise of power by authorities or described in terms of sovereignty.

Foucault (1981) used the image of the 'shepherd/pastor' (*berger/pasteur*) as a model for this form of power. A shepherd is a person who gathers, guides and leads the herd, and who assures the herd's well-being, even if this makes great demands on the shepherd. The shepherd is responsible for and has to focus on the entire 'herd,' but this is only possible when no 'sheep' escape. Everything that the shepherd does has to be done both for the benefit of the herd and for each individual sheep. The shepherd has to assure both the general well-being of the herd and the individual salvation of each sheep. Through the image of the shepherd, Foucault makes clear that pastoral power is both an individualising and a totalising power. Pastoral power also has a disciplinary aspect (Smith 2006, 101; Gärtner 2009, 175–180). The shepherd can influence the life of the sheep through his or her power and can lead and direct the sheep as he or she desires. This requires a certain

knowledge of the sheep. Knowledge can in this respect be seen as a means of power for the exercising of (disciplinary) power.

Pastoral power also comes to expression in the care for the herd – a shepherd has the duty of caring for the salvation and well-being of the herd. Therefore, pastoral power can also be called a power of care (*pouvoir de soin*) (Foucault 2004, 131). The shepherd's care for the herd gives the shepherd a certain power over the sheep, a power that manifests itself in the diligence, dedication and endless attention to all. This intertwining of power and care may be very dangerous in a relationship with children, but also in a peer relationship (Steinkamp 1999, 21–24). It can be dangerous because it is not obvious that power is an issue since the attention is focused on the 'good care.' Under this guise of care, the caregiver can control the life of the child. This is why it is important to distinguish and separate care and control in a relationship of care. 'To care for' someone in a relationship may not be equated with 'controlling' the person.

### **Pastoral power in nurturing the spirituality of children**

It is this pastoral power that is always present in dealing with children and their spirituality. In the recent literature, I have studied on children's spirituality and on nurturing this spiritually (Miller-McLemore 2003; Yust 2004; Champagne 2005; Hay and Nye 2006; Yust et al. 2006; Allen 2008; Adams, Hyde, and Woolley 2008; Hyde 2008; Nye 2009; Csinos 2011) little references to these subtle dynamics of power can be found. Rather, the authors create the impression that they are opposed to the use of power – here understood in terms of hierarchical power – in nurturing children's spirituality. For example, they are opposed to any imposition on children of what they should think or how their spirituality should take form. Rebecca Nye's tip, 'encourage wondering and questioning, limit explanation and answering' (2009, 40), exemplify this argument. The emphasis on the fact that adults do not only have to train children in spirituality, but could also learn from children about spirituality (Yust 2004, xx–xxi) also reflects the vision that everyone has a certain power and that power can be exercised in both directions, rather than a hierarchical form of power which is exercised from one person over another. This focus on forms of mutuality, probably based on an awareness of the risks of hierarchical power and imposing spirituality on children, is very valuable, but might be complemented by more reflection on more hidden forms of (pastoral) 'power' within this mutuality.

In the Flemish pastoral context, we see for example in the catechesis for confirmation, an aversion to the hierarchical form of power in the shift from catechism education that starts from the idea that spirituality can be imparted to confirmands through examining the catechism over a catechesis that puts the own experience more central to a catechesis with more playful and creative models for the advancement of a spiritual growth (see Pollefeyt and Dillen 2011). Today, catechists are encouraged to make use of different impulses that both take the experiences of life as the elements of faith into account and give impetus to further deepening of faith. For many catechists, it is not easy to implement this theory in practice. They are willing to listen to the experience of children, but they do not attach value to the experience of the children or they do not examine the experience further because they do not know how they have to react on what the children tell. Adults are often afraid to a free exploration of children in the area of faith and therefore choose to keep everything under their control.

The reaction of the experts on the field of children's spirituality against the use of hierarchical power in nurturing children's spirituality arises probably from their awareness of the ambiguity and the traps of (the hierarchical use of) power in research and education. But it is not because of experts react against and warn for the use of hierarchical power in nurturing children's spirituality that this does not mean that there is no power present or that it cannot be abused. In the following sections, I will try to make clear how Foucault's pastoral power sneaks into the nurturing of children's spirituality.

### *Pastoral power hidden in the conception of children's spirituality*

First of all, pastoral power is hidden in the very conception of children's spirituality. Because children's spirituality is seen as something that is embedded in everyday life and is part of the life of the child, every person who comes in contact with the child will partially influence the child's life. Interpersonal relationships consequently play an important role in the development of the child's spirituality (Champagne 2005, 167). To a large extent, spiritual development is always a relational event. Consequently, it goes hand in hand with (pastoral) power. For example, when a child asks why something happens to his or her mum or dad, the answer offered by the parent will always have a certain influence on the way the child looks at life and gives meaning to his or her life. Parents give their children a push in a certain direction by the way they deal with and answer their questions. For example, when parents always evade questions about the meaning of something, this may indicate to the child that one should not speak openly about spirituality and that spirituality is something strictly personal. The child may also make the interpretation that there is no meaning to life. When the child receives no answers to such questions, the child may consequently never ask questions of this sort again and will make little of spirituality. When parents do answer to these questions, it is important that they realise that what they say is taken by their children as gospel truth, and that children (unconsciously) will act in accordance with their answer. When, for example, children are told that God likes children who are nice to each other and share with each other, children are – in first instance – likely to be extra nice that day for other people and may even let play the little brother or sister with their favourite toys. In expressing their own opinion in answering their children's questions, parents (unconsciously) direct their children according to their own line of thought, just as the shepherd does with the herd.

Not only the parents' words, but also their behaviour will likely to have an influence on the spirituality of their children. The tip 'remember: it is not only about words' (Nye 2009, 29) illustrates that attitude and behaviour also play a role in nurturing spirituality. Here also, (pastoral) power is at hand. Through their own behaviour, parents can exert a directive influence on the behaviour of their children. This is mostly to be evaluated in a positive way, but it might also lead to forms of power abuse. Yust (2004) states for example: 'We must practice hospitality toward both strangers and friends, so our children will know what genuine hospitality looks and feels like' (18) and 'we must live as people who imagine that something more exists than just those things we can see and feel' (19). In this respect, there is always a disciplinary aspect involved in nurturing children's spirituality.

***Image of the child, children's spirituality and pastoral power***

Secondly, pastoral power can also be identified in the way in which the child is viewed when nurturing his or her spirituality. The studied literature clearly emphasises that the focus needs to be on the child and that the spirituality always has to be nurtured from the child's perspective. The child is considered as a full human being and an active maker of spiritual meaning. In the nurturing of spirituality, the child is the subject, rather than the object. Parents do not then have to teach their children spirituality, but rather they need to encourage them to discover their own spirituality. In terms of power, this means that parents have to use their (non-hierarchical) power to support their children in developing the power that is always present in the children themselves ('power within') and to encourage their children to use that power to explore their own spirituality and to bear responsibility for this spirituality ('empowerment'). The tip is given for instance that parents should 'support children in their spiritual questing' (Hyde 2008, 138). Another idea is that it is important that parents 'take seriously the way in which children have woven together the threads of meaning' (Hyde 2008, 123).

Considering the child as a subject who is able to make meaning has as advantage that a certain power and responsibility is attributed to the child; in this way the child is not fully considered dependent on an adult for his or her spiritual development. This would not be the case if the child were to be seen as a blank sheet that has to be written upon. When the child is considered as a passive being who is dependent on an adult for his or her religious and spiritual formation and development, the child is reduced to being an object to whom spirituality has to be taught and the parent possesses all power over (the spirituality of) the child. Seeing the child as a complete, active, spiritual meaning maker in nurturing spirituality could be a help to counteract the use of power in its hierarchical form. But some brief reactions need to be given to this vision of the child, especially in consideration of power. For example, this picture may give the impression that, in the field of spirituality, everything has to come from the child and that only he or she is fully responsible for the development of his or her own spirituality. In this case, the child is showered with too much responsibility, which may result in parentification (Dillen 2011, 8). Parentification means that the child is given (too) much responsibility and has to perform tasks that are not intended for children, but rather for adults (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 1986, 419). In other words, when parentification takes place, too much power is given to the child. Moreover, parents avoid their educational duty by believing that everything has to come from the child. Children cannot do everything of their own accord. Some things have to be passed on or taught by adults. This idea is also found in the thinking of the German practical theologian Friedrich Schweitzer (2000) who states that every child has the right to religion, and therefore it is important and necessary to pass on resources and frameworks to enable them to find an answer to the religious questions with which they are struggling. In this regard, parentification can be classified under abuse of power. Abuse of power is not only something that occurs when the caregiver treats the child as an object, without any autonomy or freedom and without any agency, for example viewing the child as an empty vessel that has to be filled. Abuse of power can also occur when overemphasis is given to the child as 'being a subject,' and the child is seen only as a fully free autonomous acting person, left alone with his or her responsibility. In this case, the assumption is made that the child can go his or her own way and be



consequently left to his or her own devices. To counteract the abuse of power in nurturing children's spirituality, it is therefore important that the child be seen as a full person who is able to act free and autonomously, to make choices, and to give meaning to life, without either overemphasising or minimising this responsibility.

### *Pastoral power and the role of the caregiver*

Thirdly, pastoral power is also to be found in the way the role of the parents/caregiver is given expression in nurturing children's spirituality. In the studied literature, much emphasis is given to the term 'with.' Nurturing children's spirituality is not something one does 'to' or 'for' one's children, but 'with' one's children (Westerhof III 2008; Csinos 2011). It is said here, for instance, that parents 'can best nurture the spiritual lives of children by walking with them on the journey' (Csinos 2011, 11–12), or that parents should share their own frameworks of meaning with their child (Hyde 2008, 123), or that parents have to search with their children for possible answers to the children's, but also to their own questions (Yust 2004, 135–136). The dynamics of power concealed behind these tips can be described in terms of 'power with,' a shared power between parents and children. These tips given in the literature certainly counteract the conception of power in its hierarchical form and seek to encourage parents in sharing their own power with their children. There also exists other literature about religious education where power is used in a different way. In this literature, parents are stimulated to use their (hierarchical) power and even are encouraged to spank the children in the religious and spiritual education (see e.g. Dobson 1993; Ellison and Bartkowski 1997).

According to the literature focusing on children's spirituality and their agency, parents (or other caregivers) would be better to adopt the role of spiritual mentor or guide and not the one of teacher or leader. Nye (2009, 83) gives for example the tip to parents that 'it might be help if you redefine your role in terms of spiritual mentor, guide or director rather than "teacher" or "leader".' Yust (2004, 164) states in this regard that 'parents are the principal guides in children's spiritual formation, yet children need a religious community within which to experience God as something other than their own friend or possession.' Csinos (2011, 11–12) proposes that 'educators, parents, pastors, and other adults can best nurture the spiritual lives of children by walking with them on the journey' and that they have to 'become co-learners with children in our quests to know God.' According to him, the adult should sometimes lead 'the child forward along the path,' and at other moments the child should guide the adult as they 'seek together the presence of the living God.'

The image of the parent as leader evokes the association of a powerful parent who knows what is good for the child and decides how the spirituality of the child should be nurtured. The image of the leader can stimulate the parent to use the power on a (negative) hierarchical way. The image of the parent as guide better expresses the sense of walking the way together and seems at first sight less associated with (hierarchical) power. The parent does not direct or lead, but accompanies. But it is precisely in this accompanying that power is hidden. When the parent acts as a guide, he or she has much power over the child. After all, a guide walks in front, has knowledge of the road, and knows which direction he or she will take. A guide directs – usually with the best intentions – the person who he or she is guiding to the way he or she considers to be the best. The image of the parent as a guide in the process of nurturing the spirituality of the child corresponds with the

image of the shepherd used by Foucault to demonstrate the presence of pastoral power. But similar to the image of the shepherd, the image of the parent as a guide can be dangerous and can give rise to abuse of power when there is no attention paid to the intertwining of power and care. It is important that caregivers are aware of the role they take in nurturing children's spirituality and that they are aware that in the way they fill in this role of caregiver always a certain power is hidden.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to indicate how pastoral power is always present in the process of nurturing children's spirituality. By looking at the concept of 'nurturing children's spirituality' through the glasses of power, I can conclude that an attempt is made to avoid using power in its hierarchical form, but in its place, there are other hidden forms of power present. This is mainly due to the intertwining of care and control, as Foucault clearly indicates in using the term 'pastoral power.' Nurturing children's spirituality will always be a part of the care for the child.

It is not my intention to suggest in this article that the way children's spirituality is approached and nurtured is bad and necessarily gives cause for abuse of power. I have sought mainly to link pastoral power with nurturing children's spirituality in order to create awareness of the hidden forms of power, in the hope that an awareness of power may increase the possibility of power being dealt with in an appropriate way.

## Notes on contributor

Machteld Reynaert recently received a PhD in Theology from the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven. She is a member of the Research Unit Pastoral Theology and Empirical Theology. Her research is about power, children, and pastoral theology.

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